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ABSTRACT

Professional literature reporting the use of the "cliff-hanger" as genre as a teaching tool in writing instruction is relatively quiet. College students may become better writers and readers when they write cliff-hangers and allow other students to read their writing. Sixty-five undergraduate reading students at a southeastern Arkansas university were assigned a cliff-hanger as the first of many reading and writing assignments before their elementary student teaching experience. Students contributed to each others' stories, and the original author revised and completed his or her own story. After incorporating more peer suggestions, each author submitted a final draft, which was bound into a book. At the end of the semester the teacher collected student reflections upon the assignment. Student affective responses included: (1) apprehension about the assignment; (2) gratification from working together with peers; (3) the fulfillment of overcoming insecurities about writing ability; and (4) the self-determination felt in controlling what they could do with their own writing; and (5) overall amusement. The cliff-hanger gives students the opportunity to explore writing in non-traditional ways and helps them become more competent teachers. (Thirteen references are attached.) (SG)

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# Writing in reading classes: The cliff-hanger affect

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Writing in reading classes:
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In the whole language approach to learning the argument has essentially been that the more students write the better writers they will become (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). Chomsky (1971) believes extended writing also helps students become more effective readers, sort of a by-product of writing. Many college teachers face a problem procuring students to write and read. One way to get college students to write and read is to allow them to write about scenes from everyday life, and edit their own writing. Another way is to allow students to read and edit other students' writing. If we define 'genre' as portrayals of scenes from life there are many genres reading teachers can use as a medium to teach writing, and thus, reading. For example, Zinsser (1980) recommends writing about a place, Goldberg (1986) advocates writing about people met in a strange place, and Gould (1989) suggests writing about people met in a strange place during childhood. The genre catalog is extensive; however the literature reporting using the cliff-hanger genre as a teaching tool is relatively quiet. Consequently, college students may become better writers and readers when they write cliff-hangers and allow other students

to read their writing. But, this is a non-traditional approach to writing and reading, and reading teachers may be surprised at how this approach affects students.

Thus, this article looks at the affect of students writing cliff-hangers in a college reading class, and is divided into four sections. First, the author describes the circumstances of writing cliff-hangers. The second section discusses the data collection and analysis. The third section delineates how writing cliff-hangers affected the students. The article concludes with a short discussion of the implications of writing cliff-hangers in a college reading class.

Circumstances

This activity involved sixty-five undergraduate reading students in a Southeast Arkansas university. It was the first of many writing and reading activities the students would complete before their elementary student-teaching experience. The teacher constructed prior knowledge about cliff-hangers by discussing genres in general and cliff-hangers in particular. The students were also asked to discuss with their parents the cliff-hanger movie serials popular during the forties.

Writing the cliff-hangers took about six class periods. The first day the teacher asked students to self-select a topic and begin writing a creative story. They were to write for ten or fifteen minutes, develop a story line, and try to leave it hanging. The students

were then to place their unfinished cliff-hanger on a table at the front of the classroom, and pick up another student's hanger. After this, each student was to read the unfinished hanger, continued writing the hanger for another few minutes, and were to leave their peer's hanger hanging. The students repeated this exchange process until the end of the class. The second class period the teacher returned the hangers to the original writers, and told them the stories belong to them. The students took the hangers home, made any corrections thought necessary, such as tying all the hangers into a cohesive story, and brought the corrected cliff-hangers back to the next class. During the third class each student allowed another student to read it and make suggestions for improvements. The original author made approximately four revisions before turning in a typed draft at the beginning of the fourth class. The students used the fifth and sixth class periods to bind all the cliff-hangers into a book. At the end of the semester the teacher gave the students an opportunity to reflect on their feelings about writing cliff-hangers. Hence, the teacher collected sixty-five student reflections about student feelings concerning writing cliff-hangers.

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

The teacher reflected on what writing cliff-hangers meant in terms of exploring affect in writing, and used a three step inductive process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze and triangulate the data. The teacher read the data several times, searching in particular for what students had to say concerning affect, and then made rough personal notes pursuing categories. Second, the teacher used mapping techniques to internalize existing categories to refine the emerging categories, and third used clustering and connections to refine the emerging categories (Jones, 1985). The teacher shared the categories with three students to read, and make corrections or amplifications. The students returned the categories with alterations.

Exploring affect in writing cliff-hangers

Mathewson (1985) argues that it is necessary to establish one basic affect characteristic, and then build on it. If this is true, it appears that the affect value "attitude toward writing" influenced the students writing perspectives during and after writing the cliff-hangers. Thus, "attitude" was used as the central construct to guide the search for additional affect characteristics. In so doing, five, sometimes overlapping, affect characteristics emerged from the data.

The "apprehension" affect characteristic quickly emerged during the writing of the cliff-hangers. Several students, like Barbara, did not like the idea of writing cliff-hangers, "My first gut reaction was not very favorable. I was caught between a rock and a hard place. I didn't want to do this at first, but knew I had to get started. I was scared and a little worried." Barbara's initial aversion probably stems from a lack of writing experience. These students did not have much writing experience, much less writing cliff-hangers, and were not sure how to approach the assignment. Apprehension also raised its head during the editing process, as Susan explains, "Now came the hard part, I had to fix it. I had to decide what I wanted to keep from the original story, and then expound on those ideas. I worried that I would write something wrong." Sometimes students like Susan worry so much about pleasing others they loose sight of the intent of the assignment. Like Susan, Julia became apprehensive because of a misconception about editing, "After rewriting my story so it now made sense, I assumed the project was over. But, I learned that I once again had to rewrite it after reading it aloud to someone. They were to explain when the story did not flow well, or if it was grammatically incorrect. I also worried about critiquing peer writing." Although the teacher warned that the editing process would follow the composing

process, many students, like Julia, worried about editing from the first. It seems that they wanted to edit as they composed. This is probably a carry-over from traditional writing instruction where students learn the conventions of writing before they are given an opportunity to be creative. Jackie also talks about apprehension, but she overcame an initial worry, "Sitting there, I worried about and found it very hard to come up with an idea, so I decided to begin my story by explaining why I had committed a terrible act, but I never told what that act was." Once Jackie overcame s self-imposed writer's block, she found a certain enjoyment in being cagey.

Several students got caught up in Jackie's thrill of trying to compromise another student, and a second affect characteristic, "gratification," emerged during the writing exercise. Judy explains, "The fun part was reading what other people had added to your paper. On the other hand, it was also fun to try to add something to someone else's story that would be exciting and interesting." Perhaps Judy was being shrewd like Jackie, but Mary saw the exercise more as a writing festival, "Suddenly this assignment got to be fun. The story I received was about a man deciding to become a male stripper. Although I had a hard time coming up with ideas for my own paper, I was full of ideas for

this one. I expanded the story by creating a problem for him--he weighed 350 pounds. This was the most enjoyable writing experiences that I have had."

Mary's enjoyment leads to "fulfillment" as a third affect characteristic. Cliff-hangers helped students like Cathy to overcome feelings of insecurity because at first she did not know what to write, "The hardest thing for me was getting the initial paragraph started. Deciding what subject to write on and how to get it moving was tough. I don't remember ever having a writing assignment that created so much insecurity, a turmoil of inner feelings. My feelings were really churning there at first." Vanessa found self-fulfillment in reading the accomplishments of her peers, "It was amazing to me how my original story had taken so many turns. Most of the writings were funny, but one person unexpectedly switched to a serious tone, and one person wrote something that did not connect to the story at all. Yet, each writing was fascinating to read because I saw something imaginative being expressed in each work." Other students, like Tonya, experienced fulfillment later during the editing sessions, "I am not that great a writer, but I never before rewrote a paper three times. Grammar is my weak spot so I grudging began to edit and rewrite. My excitement over this assignment began to fade, but when I finished my paper I was impressed with the difference between the original and

final draft. Each time I edited, I had a better paper." And, Tonya's peer, Sherrie, found fulfillment after publishing the book, "When the teacher showed me the book containing our stories, I immediately flipped to mine. Although I felt I knew it by heart after all the editing, I slowly read each line. It may sound silly, but my first thought was 'I can't wait to show it to mom.'" Cathy, Vanessa, Tonya, and Sherrie found fulfillment in somewhat different ways, but in the end the four were pleased with their accomplishments.

A fourth affect characteristic has to do with "self-determination." Malinda remembers, "Little did I know that the cliff-hanger project would be an assignment that would change my life." When asked how it changed her life, she replied, "For the first time while writing I felt I had the power to control what I could do with my writing. This was not your typical writing assignment." Several other students remarked that they would carry remembrances of the cliff-hanger assignment with them to their first teaching position and use it as a model to teach writing to elementary children. Barbie explains, "I feel the cliff-hanger could be a valuable asset for elementary students. It allowed me to make my own decisions concerning the story. The responsibility of elementary students making their own decision is in itself a way to win them over because it emphasizes the importance of their opinion."

Bobbie Sue connects "fun" with feelings of pride, "Another positive aspect is the feeling of accomplishment and pride the elementary student will feel is by looking at the finished product, especially if it is bound into book form. The feeling that the student has made an important contribution to something worthwhile and valuable is extremely important to self-esteem." Shelia also talks about self-determination, "Positive enforcement of efforts similar to this may made a difference in a child's outlook on writing." In addition, Randy seemed to be surprised to find that cliff-hangers could be a vehicle to learn conventional rules of writing, "This activity has shown me that writing and even learning the rules of grammar can be fun. I feel that when students are allowed to be creative and enjoy their education they develop a desire within themselves to learn. " Willie May connects ownership with excitement, and helping future students, "I particularly enjoyed this creative writing activity because there was an excitement in working on other students stories. These were real ego boosters. I never realized how important it is to do things like this until I experienced it myself. I would use this creative writing activity to excite students about learning."

The fifth and final affect characteristic "amusement" seems to intermix with the other four. Georgia sums up this characteristic, "We all got caught up in cliff-hangers because they were fun to do, fun to write, and it was fun to play around with words. For some, it may have started out tough, but before it was over we were all laughing at what we were reading."

Conclusions

The first thing to be said about writing cliff-hangers is that these reading students changed their views about writing. It can be successfully debated that other affect variables effect student writing. However, it is important to remember this was a single study which identified five affect variables that effected students' writing in one writing exercise. These five variables suggest that the way students write is related to how they feel about writing. If this is correct, those using writing in reading classrooms first need to be alert to students with low self-esteems. These students may view writing as being a unpleasant task. We should try to teach writing in a positive and happy context. When students assume they can write well, they probably will, but these are not the students we need to worry about, just let them write. However for the ones who have a negative view of writing, attitude changes may have to take place before they become effective writers.

Howard and Barton (1986) argue that writers cannot know what their thoughts are until they see them on paper. Writing cliff-hangers give reading students an opportunity to see their thoughts, and other students' thoughts, on paper. This exercise also gives reading students a chance to change their thoughts, and to change their peers written thoughts as well. Elbow (1981) suggests that writers develop raw written material during ten to thirty minutes of "nonstop freewriting" (p. 51). The cliff-hanger provides reading students several opportunities to develop raw material, both self-selected and peer material. Murray (1987) states that effective writers circle their raw material, looking and searching until they discover a focus to develop into a workable draft. Writing the cliff-hangers allow reading students to circle fresh, raw material. It also allows students to go through an editing process trying to develop a focus. The book the students edited can represent a workable draft. A workable draft is the best teachers can ask for when they make an assignment with a deadline.

In closing, the cliff-hanger exercise is an effective way to incorporate Howard and Barton, Elbow and Murray's perspectives to help reading students prepare for student teaching and become more competent teachers. Many of the students in this reading class were passive writers in the beginning because they had

little writing experience. Writing cliff-hangers can go a long ways toward helping students change their attitudes toward writing. The cliff-hanger gave these students an opportunity to explore writing in non-traditional ways, and like Malinda noted, it affects them in ways never before experienced.

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